

Muddy Prints, Water Shine

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Kayaking Folly Creek

I want to turtle along,
slide my kayak into a tidal creek,
flare the white paddle into green water
and skim between the tips of grasses,
swing the pointed bow around a bend

to see the sun rise on the first of November,
the wind blow up across land and water,
an S-shaped channel of shine bearing
shallows here, narrows there,
dawdle without a map to a sandbar

where gulls and hooded mergansers,
cormorants, willets, and pipers
gather to sleep or dry their wings or
balance on one leg, hop from time to time,
not feeding but alert to possibility.

Philomel

Before she learns mourning
a girl discovers black horses,

black bees, a blossom's groin,
grackles and sunflower seeds.

A swollen moon, wafer-thin,
rises in a milk-blue sky.

The nature of water is to run.
Grass roots in mud.

The wafer forced between her lips
clings to the roof of her mouth

where she can't taste
or say, at first, what happened.

Collared doves settle and gasp
while a nightingale learns singing.

A Dog's Fiddle

A moon is waning above the field,
crushing the features of the face
or scrubbing them, to a desiccating gradient —
a finish — frayed, narrowed, riddled, rued
— all disappear for orbital reasons,
the cycling round of dark and light,
green flash and restitution — the vagabond spoon,
the brindle cow, the dream-tipped sea.

Opening

The child first sees his great-grandmother
hunched in a kitchen chair, her head balding,
a black patch covering one eye.

She turns toward him, opens the other eye
and makes a sound like a bird whistling.

At dinnertime she wears black sunglasses,
drags a spoon across a plate without looking,
raises the mush to her cheek where the food spills
and makes her laugh — a high bleating sound —
until everyone at the table is laughing.

After he brushes his teeth he stands at her chair
for the one eye to open out of the lizard skin
and he kisses her cheek and hears a sound
from her mouth like rocks making a landslide.

Along the Shore of Lake Pinewild

Fish fan in the man's shadow.
He squats and huffs

at the white geese
hissing.

The stone in his shoe
is evidence.

A gander paddlewheels
on jeweled legs.

Old English Game Bantam

Strut the yard, cock, jut your head,
sway your bruiser's body, snub
my fingers (wanting to trail your wingspread,
slalom your short back's slope).

Parade, vainglorious red-scalloped one,
gold and black emperor of pullets,
the arch plume of your high-swept tail,
your dove-hued ruffles hiding secrets.

Tango toward me, Romeo, elongate your nape,
let my hands cup your belly,
graze the length of your birdscape.

Roll up your eyelids,
rock on toothpick pins, neck slack and beak unslung —
daft bird! You're dazzled by a fool's attention.

Lesson

I asked for a photo of fetuses
inside the uterus
of the pig you shot.

A rabbit uterus is shaped like a Y,
pink ribbons that rinse from the body's trough
along with the rest of the workings.
Inside an old breeder,
knots along the Y-arms
record the history of fetuses.

Nose to tail, first one, then the next
slack kit pulses through Y-stem to air;
the doe bites the cord, licks the ribcage
to kickstart breath. I've stroked spasm
into lungs for a kit that needed it.

Those not quite piglets you tossed
to compost's stink and flies,
I wanted to trace the shape (pear
or Y), to measure the heat
and ebb of colors, to slow
the pace of their hearts leaving.

The Scent of Skunk

gasp and sweetness
atmosphere a proof
of time passing

air displaced
by what bristles at
sprays

let the owl
swoop down
barred wings batter

what passes
gasp and sweetness
we breathe

Bovine

Ireland is green
and patterned with cows —
milk and beef,
handled and brindled.

Behind the cows
stand churners,
bottlers, stunners,
butchers, chefs.

I admire, I adore the cows.
A lady from Wisconsin complains,
"Why does she keep on saying cow?
She's not a child."

Hawk Watch

The fog that shrouds Pilot Mountain
dims our chance to see hawks kettle,
so we hike around Big Pinnacle on trails
where brown signs mark beginnings
and red-lettered signs suggest
the possibilities of injury or death.

Trails bracketed by rail fence
descend by steps of orange stone
to sandy windings, rocky ground
where twigs extend from pitch,
where long-haired caterpillars inch
across the leaves of laurel, and where webs
the shape of shallow sacks hang down
from water-spangled threads.

Sudden gusts shake drops from trees —
chestnut, oak, persimmon.
Rainbow lichens cover quartzite,
a towering dome,
climbing the rocks is forbidden
while ravens nest.
Red, white, yellow mushrooms
speckle the forest floor,
fungus grows in staggered layers
(childishly stacked plates).

When the fog begins to lift
we climb to stand for hours
amid the whirling swifts and monarch flutter.
Vultures — turkey and black —
converge and circle
gnarled and blasted trees.
Through glasses we spy warblers
in a leafy tangle — tseeta tseeta rising
from ribbed, spotted, pure throats.

Finally the heavens clear.
One by one the broad-winged hawks —
white stripes on their tails,
black bands on their wings —
remind us of what we may mourn
as they soar out of the north
toward winter.

Hitchhiker

The hermit crab
is wearing
a snail's shell.

Articulate
legs flank
the pincers,

antennae weaving,
eye stalks,
domed medallion.

A pen forages
inside the shell,
frees a tail

that coils
around the ballpoint tip
— is inked.

Emptied shell.
Spilled being.

A Natural History of Balloons

Flown scraps,
foiled swells,
so much sampled
tide-scrim. This was
once a bright
clown singing
to a child ducking
away.

Kilauea

Fresh lava creeps, wrinkling
through rockpiles and hapu fern,

past purple backs of hands,
tree frogs smaller than thumbs.

Long nights are fractured
with screaming.

Behind the healer's house
a yellow schoolbus, weed-festooned,

bumpered to a tanker-truck.
Pink plumes of cane drop seed

on stainless steel. She places
her hands on flesh's clamor —

one touch erases,
another creates.

Lake Sunset

A Canada goose
feels its double unfold;
gray wings burn gold.

A cloud camel
inverts to ice cream cones
strung from ribbons.

Gusts high and low
remodel a range of dunes
into orange begging bowls and then

blues dim,
mirrors unsilver,
and the goose swims alone.

Spider Strand

In a single night
a garden spider flings her web
across our drive, from neat hedge
to the gutter above the garage.

We step outside
to find her blazoned against the orb.
Mike moves to ground her.

Eight legs in barber stripes
climb a strand, then hesitate —
she seems to measure us.

“Stop,” I say.
I hold Mike’s arm. I spin him around
to the orb of sun blazing.

Our spider rides her silk
back to the gutter, steadily reels it back
into the spinnerets
she spun an evening from.

Two Hungers

A rabbit bounds into the yard,
stops at the bed of gloriosa
dimming to copper.

It lowers its head for a leaf
then sits tall while chewing,
green hanging from its mouth,
cheeks working 'til the leaf is gone.

One leaf after another,
the daisy stems tremble
as leaves are torn away.

We spread our toast with peach
and watch 'til we are full.

The Arms of Three Men

I'm scanning the forest for longleaf pines,
searching for the largest, alive or dead
or dying, lightning-struck, over-beetled.

Trees lean from the strain of tapping —
ax cuts angled like chevrons, slaves charged
with daily quotas, decades of tars dripped,

resins cupped from basins, overseers counting
the pines missed, the quarter-acres ignored.
I take to clasping pines. Bark weeps

at my fingers. I measure deadfall, decipher stumps
ringed by curling pages, wonder that three men
had time for holding hands, spanning trees.

The Blues Lift

(or melt)
in the night

the fish I tracked
below the bridge

at the reservoir
the flights of juncos

Plain Sinking

The bright red shoes
the bio-gear'd soles
rock me cheerily along a paved surface

a boat bucking seas
a hey a nonny the path
aha a pond draws me across green

to smutty white
my blunder my slide
an audience of young brown frogs cheeping

ten now thirty
spring and splash down
at my red boats commandeering

The Hose

Coupled lengths of yellow hose
run from a bleeder valve through the rainforest
across meadows into the emptying duck pond
where guppies and rainbow speartails swarm
to breathe in oxygen routed from a mountain stream.
Whoever rides the mower stays to one side
or the other of the cobbled-together drip feed.
Bright colors, then a weedy stripe remind
the mower where the hose lies. After the rains come
we dismantle the plumbing, the pond floods
the low patches, grass grows high, ducks sit nests
in bogs — we rescue three hatchlings. Finally one day
the mowing resumes in the old circular pattern
skirting the edge of the woods where yellow snakes
rise in coils, multiply, stream
between the blades.

Night Wakes Me

I hear the stream's
dark roar.

Every window wide
and still no rain.

The breeze blows chill
across my limbs.

Inside, the beating
of my same old heart.

I look for a star,
see two more.

Morning Fog

A deer down
in a ditch, ears high

with listening,
turns away from the road

toward woods
she might leap for

were her legs folded,
not broken

by the wheels of a car
like ours.

Gardens she grazed
are safe from her visits.

A thicket's flattened bed
begins to freshen.

Migrant

Next to a Carolina highway,
face ringed like an owl's in white feathers,
the northern harrier stands in the gusts of September.
Dark wings, down-turned beak, staring eyes,
a folded tail, speckled thighs.

The drivers are blind
to the pale bib concealing
the span of muscles tied to a breastbone's keel,
muscles quiet, resting toward the moment
when the bird flies.

Mind the Face

As morning's tidal outflow drains the marsh
and raises muddy prints in water shine
the girl

exposes nape and throat.
A heron blunders up from grass
with a grating cry.

The ebbing marsh
mirrors a house, aligns what distance blurs.
She tilts a glass,

she wishes to grow small enough
to be missed.
When she asks him not to speak

he smiles. Her mind
proposes two eyes, a nose, a mouth.
She's afraid

to love someone this much.

Great Pink

A flamingo, a gone goose —
darken to gray

as the marsh she sips
dissolves, her legs

and her wings lengthen —
she's weightless, wisping,

chalk-dusting away.
She leaves behind

a string of silver fish
for the full moon,

that chaste, sad face.